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Helen Vanderburg

Award-winning international fitness instructor, successful businesswoman, and mother of two, **Helen Vanderburg** has made fitness her business

# Going Like Helen

by LOUISE HODGSON-JONES  
photography by EWAN NICHOLSON

The fitness industry owes a lot to Helen Vanderburg. A pioneer in the early days of the aerobics boom, her passion for fitness over two decades has transformed the industry from the physical, high-impact, hot and heady workout of the '80s to the balanced and sophisticated mind-body development of today. Whether managing her two health clubs, presenting at international conventions, or creating certification courses for fitness leaders, her tireless energy has made a tremendous influence on the fitness industry. She is in demand worldwide as a speaker and teacher—she attends 18 to 20 international conferences a year—because she has the experience to present on a wide range of topics. “When a conference is looking for speakers, they look for someone who is knowledgeable in many areas,” she says. “I am particularly successful internationally because if a conference is going to bring you over they want to use you in a number of different ways.

Makeup by JADE CARRY, Hair by ALAIN DARVEAU, CHROME, clothing courtesy SHE ATHLETICWEAR

*Helen with nine month-old Sage*

Vanderburg became involved in the fitness industry after she retired from a highly successful career in synchronized swimming in 1980. The world-champion gold medallist finished a degree in physical education at the University of Calgary and, after a year working as a personal trainer at the Glencoe Club, opened her own aerobics studio, Heavens, in 1982. The timing couldn't have been better. The aerobics boom had just arrived, and within one month all the classes at Heavens were full. "It was the Jane Fonda era; the classes were high-impact, and we did our own choreography. We even hired a DJ to put our music together, which was unheard of in those days," she explains.

Largely influenced by the trends coming from Los Angeles, Vanderburg visited the aerobics capital many times to get ideas that she could use at Heavens. "Our mandate when we opened the club was always to be on the leading edge of fitness programming. Our vision was to spot a trend and run with it. Fitness fads come and go, but trends stay with us, and 90 per cent of our programming was based on those trends."

Her innovative ideas and passion for the industry led her to start training instructors and then presenting at fitness conventions, which in the late 1980s were becoming more prevalent and popular. "There weren't a lot of courses out there, so we started at the early stage and then developed a consulting company." The company, HI Fitness, also consults to fitness facilities on business issues. As the owner of one successful health club and co-owner of another—Fountain Park Club—she has sound advice to offer facilities in many areas, including marketing, programming, and equipment selection.

It's the programming side of the health club business that has seen the most change over the last 20 years. The '80s were all cardiovascular based, and moving into the '90s strength training came into its own. The new millennium brought the mind-body element that is growing in popularity with both the baby boomers and the younger sector. "The mind-body evolution is here to stay," says Vanderburg. "Like all trends, it will peak and then level off. We are seeing that with yoga and Pilates. There are people who still want to train hard, but as the boomers get older they want a softer approach to fitness."

Travelling the world extensively has meant that she is able to experience first hand how fitness is evolving in other countries. Bringing ideas home is what keeps her on the edge as she incorporates and adapts what she has seen work well in other studios. "Fortunately I love to travel, so I am able to combine my two passions." Is there any one country that is a step ahead in fitness? "The U.K. is a lot more progressive, edgy, unique—they do things we might not think of trying. It's a departure from North America and very fresh."

It's to the U.K. that Vanderburg and her family will be travelling this month, as she and her husband will be presenting at the same conference. Married for 13 years to Terry Kane, former physiotherapist to the Calgary Flames and the Canadian Olympic Hockey Team, she has two daughters, seven-year-old Kiah and Sage, just nine months. How does she balance her jet-setting business life with being a wife and mother? "Terry is very supportive and loves spending time with the kids." They involve the children as much as they can and, when they are attending the same conference, often take their daughters with them. "When I travel on my own, Terry will look after them, and vice versa. The important thing when you have a business and a family is to be adaptable and flexible, as it doesn't always go the way you want it to go."

Although Sage is a little young to show an interest in fitness, Kiah has already taught a yoga class to her grade-one classmates as part of an activity assignment. Mom was very proud. "She was fabulous. It was amazing to see how she absorbed everything and was able to teach the other children."

In between her business trips and other interests, Vanderburg still manages to teach six to seven classes a week at her club. But that doesn't leave her a lot of time for her own workout. As a lot of her classes are cardio based, she tries to balance her teaching schedule with doing strength training, yoga, and Pilates. "I do short 15-minute bouts of training that incorporate the ball and some dumbbells, because of the time factor."

Spare time is something that Vanderburg doesn't have a lot of, but when she does you can be sure that she will be working hard to adapt the next fitness trend with her own inimitable stamp of success. **f**

## A C H I E V E M E N T S

### SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMING

- 1973 – Junior Canadian Champion
- 1978 – Gold Medal (solo and duet) at the World Aquatic Games, Berlin
- 1979 – Gold Medal (solo and duet) at the Pan American Games, Puerto Rico, and FINA World Cup, Tokyo
- 1979 – Gold Medal (solo) the Pan Pacific Games, Christchurch, New Zealand
- 1978 & 1979 – Canada's Female Athlete of the Year
- 1980 – Inducted into the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame
- 1983 – Inducted into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame

### FITNESS ENTREPRENEUR

- 1996 – IDEA Program Director of the Year
- 1996 – CanFit Pro Instructor of the Year.
- 2001 – The Mall Peepre Memorial Award by the National Fitness Leadership Advisory Council (NFLAC)
- 2001 – Calgary Women of Vision Award for her outstanding contribution to fitness leadership
- 2005 – IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year



*Helen receiving the IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year award*